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ABSTRACT

The author discusses a number of common pronunciation difficulties for speakers of Brazilian Portuguese learning English. She recommends that the teacher first explain and demonstrate the correct articulation and then drill the sounds in minimal contrasting pairs. Examples of short dialogs, sentences, and rhymes are given here to illustrate their use in teaching specific problem sounds. (JD)

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SOME PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

by
Marion de Lima Junior

It is a well-known fact that when a pupil is learning a foreign language he is faced with many problems caused by the interference of his mother tongue: the linguistic habits acquired during his childhood are forcibly, naturally stronger than the new ones in which he has to train himself. Although the mother tongue may sometimes help the learner on occasions where the two sound systems are similar, there are many instances where they differ and, as a result, there is a danger that the student may speak and later write the new language incorrectly.

For speakers of Portuguese the two sounds /ð/ and /θ/ which are represented in English by the spelling <u>th</u> are examples of this kind of difficulty, and I find that sometimes students who have long mastered all the other sounds still find difficulty in making these two. The first is often replaced by / t / or / s / and the other by / z / or / d /.

To overcome this problem I myself teach the students the position of the organs of speech for the pronunciation of the sounds: and I recommend the teacher to demonstrate, describe the procedure and then have the pupils imitate. I find it best if I exaggerate the articulation of the sound by placing the tip of the tongue so that it projects out between the upper and lower teeth, and then blow so that a stream of air passes out between the tip of the tongue and the edge of the upper teeth. The lower lip must be kept out of the way while pronuncing these sounds with the pupils.

After our pupils have become familiar with this type of - exaggerated - practice it is easy to get them to modify the position of the tongue to the normal one for the production of these sounds - namely,

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the tip of the tongue against the upper teeth and the main part of the tongue fairly flat. Once this has been mastered I find it very useful to drill the sounds in minimal pairs:

/ θ / and / s /

thin	sin	tenth	tense
thought	sort	path	pass
thigh	sigh	fourth	force
thorn	sawn	moth	moss

/ θ / and / t /

thin	tin	thrill	trill	tenth	tent
thaw	tore	thread	tread	path	part
thorn	torn	deaths	debts	fourth	fort
threw	true	maths	mats		

/ θ / and / ð /

teeth	teethe	wreath	wreathe	loth	loathe
thigh	thy	sooth	soothe	sheath	sheathe

/ ð / and / z /

writhe - rise clothe - close writhing - rising

/ ð / and / d /

those	- dose	bathe	- bayed
though	- dough	breathe	- breed
there	- dare	lithe	- lied
they	- day	seethe	- seed

Perhaps some of my readers are suprised by the fact that I have included a number of 'rare' words in the drills: but we should bear in mind that the drills are essentially for pronunciation practice and it is therefore not necessary to choose only words with the range of vocabulary known to our pupils.

I note that my students find the sounds / ð / and / θ / are particularly difficult when they occur near the sounds / z / and / s /, and sentences such as the following provide useful practice: 1) This is the thing. 2) Who's that? 3) What's that? 4) Is there? 5) Was there? 6) Is this it? 7) What's this? 8) What's the time? 9) It's this one. 10) Is the other one there? A short dialogue, such as the following, can be repeated by pupils in class until the teacher is quite certain that the two sounds have been mastered:

T. What are <u>these</u>, João?
P. <u>These</u> are your fingers.
T. <u>This</u> is my first finger; <u>this</u> is my second finger. What about this one, Pedro?
P. <u>That</u> is your <u>fourth</u> finger.
T. And <u>this</u>? (touching the pupil's finger)
P. This is my <u>fourth</u> finger.
T. And what is <u>this</u>?
P. <u>That</u> is John's <u>thumb</u>, etc.

Further exercises on these two sounds could be developed by the teacher based on the examples I have given.

Another sound which does not exist in Portuguese is the English voiceless glottal fricative / h /. Many Brazilians when trying to imitate this sound replace it with the voiceless velar fricative / x / which is pronounced with the front of the tongue sufficiently high to add a slight retroflex colouring. This sound is represented by the letter <u>r</u>: at the beginning of a word as in <u>rato</u> /xatu/; before a consonant as in <u>porto</u> /poxtu/ and at the end of a word as in <u>amar</u> /emax/. Therefore many Brazilians will say /xẽm/ instead of /hem/, /xit/ instead of /hit/.

I myself begin by explaining that the <u>h</u> sound before vowels is not a sound like those described earlier in this article which are studied as to their manner of articulation and then practised: the symbol <u>h</u> is used to represent the sound of pure breath having a free passage through the mouth. They have, in fact, only to precede the pronunciation of the vowel with strong breath. First of all I get them to <u>whisper</u> pure vowel

sounds such as / a: / / i: / / u: / and then proceed to drills such as the following:

(a)	ale	- hale		eel	- heel
	edge	- hedge		eight	- hate
	art	- heart		owl	- howl
	air	- hair		I	- high
	ill	- hill		eat	- heat
(b)	hay	- ray		hill	- rill
	hen	- wren		hail	- rail
	ham	- ram		hate	- rate
	hear	- rear		high	- rye
	hair	- rare		hoe	- row

The drilling of pairs in this way can then be followed by sentences:

1) He is bald; he hasn't a hair on his head.
2) The hen ran up the hill after the wren.
3) Good ale makes a man hale and hearty.
4) If you hang the ham from the rafter no harm will come to it.
5) He hurled the ball into the air and it hit the railings around the house.
6) How can one hear, with such a row going on in here?
7) A dog howls and an owl hoots.
8) A hen cackles and a wren chirps.

A somewhat different problem is that caused by the tendency which Brazilians have to add a final vowel sound / i / when pronouncing English words ending in consonant sounds other than / ʃ /, / s /, / z /. For this reason words such as club, film and milk are pronounced as / 'klubi /, / 'filmi / and / milki /. I find that students also have great difficulty with certain consonant clusters occuring medially so that for obscure we have / ɔbiskjə / and for optical /ɔpitikəl/. Indeed, this tendency to insert a vowel sound into consonant clusters is so strong that we find our students inserting them in their own language and agnóstico then becomes /æginɔstziku/.

Again, in Portuguese there are no words beginning with the clusters / sk /, / sp /, or / st /. As a result our students turn <u>sky</u> into / iskai /, <u>sport</u> into / ispɔ:t / and <u>stand</u> into / istæ nd /. The initial cluster / sm / is replaced by / izm / and <u>small</u> thus becomes / izmɔ:1 /.

The fact that in Portuguese so few consonants are pronounced in final position makes drills such as the following particularly useful:

tap	-	tab		bat	-	bad		back	-	bag
nip	-	nib		rot	-	rod		lock	-	log
hop	-	hob		but	-	bud		peck	-	peg
sop	-	sob		right	-	ride		leak	-	league

If the foregoing should seem rather dull and mechanical, then the following rhymes could be taught:

(a) Bat, bat, come under my hat,
And I'll give you a slice of bacon;
And when I bake, I'll give you a cake
If I am not mistaken.

(b) Jack Sprat could eat no fat,
His wife could eat no lean,
And so, to cut the matter short,
They licked the plate clean.

(c) Eggs and bacon,
Bacon and fat;
In four letters
Spell me <u>that</u>!

Simple, brief dialogues, such as the following, which are written with specific difficulties in view - in this case initial consonant clusters - are useful aids:

Teacher: Which of these sticks is the smallest?
Pupil : The stick on the right is the smallest.
Teacher: What am I wearing today?
Pupil : You are wearing a blouse and skirt.
Teacher: Is Maria present today?
Pupil : No, she's absent.

The above dialogues are, of course, very brief; but it is precisely because of this that they sound so natural, and I much prefer them to

some of the longer, artificial dialogues found in many textbooks of English pronunciation.

For Brasilians / m / and / n / in final position present a special difficulty: for in Portuguese these sounds are not pronounced when in final position - the preceding vowel merely being nasalized. Naturally our students do the same when they are learning to speak English: the following dialogues are useful in this instance:

T: What country do you come from?
P: I come from Brazil.
T: Is the sun strong in Brazil?
P: Yes, the sun is strong in Brazil etc. etc.

The field of pronunciation problems is a vast one, and in this article I have been able to deal only with a few of those which we have to face in the classroom. The solutions suggested are only tentative ones, based on my own experience, but I hope nevertheless that they will be of some help to colleagues teaching English in Brazil.